WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS
1. HIS DEATH
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Psalm 91:1–16
Isaiah 55:10–13
Luke 4:1–13

"When they came to the place that is called The Skull,
they crucified Jesus there with the criminals,
one on his right and one of his left."
Luke 23:33 (NRSV)

Dear God, we come at the beginning of another Lenten season
to begin our journey, which will end at the foot of the cross.
We've heard it before; we've heard it sung;
we've seen it in art and motion pictures.
Startle us, O God, with its truth,
and open our hearts and minds anew
to its amazing love and hope. Amen

Chicago Tribune columnist John Kass was having lunch last Monday at his favorite diner, exchanging small talk with two waitresses. The subject of Mel Gibson's motion picture *The Passion of the Christ* came up. Kass had seen a prerelease viewing. One waitress wondered what he thought, whether or not he liked it: "You know—that feeling you get after a good movie and it's in your head and in your heart." I understand what she meant exactly. It's how I evaluate a movie: how long after seeing it does it remain in my head and my heart. Some are gone in an hour. Some are still in there after years, decades.

"Was it bloody" one waitress asked.

"Bloodier," Kass answered

"Well it happened," she said. And then she made her confession of faith: "He took our sins upon himself. He redeemed us by his pain and suffering. That's what he did."
And then the other waitress: "It worries me that I'll see my poor Jesus suffer so much for me."

I've never seen anything like it: the public response before the movie was released was, I thought, unprecedented. Much of it was carefully cultivated. A month ago I received a multipage, slick advertisement offering to ministers and churches resources for using the movie for evangelistic purposes: mailers, banners, door hangers, impact website, discussion guides, seven different greeting cards, a free newsletter, bulletin covers, personalized invitations, and, of course, sermon resources and outlines.

In the past two months or so, Jesus has appeared on the cover, in the pages and headlines of, every national magazine and local newspapers. My file of movie reviews and commentaries is thicker for *The Passion* than any other topic I can recall. And, as a result, the $25 million movie financed by Mel Gibson brought in close to $20 million by the end of the first day of its release.

If nothing else, Mel Gibson has stimulated a unique and unprecedented public discussion of one of the central tenets of Christian faith and has created, unwittingly, a teaching and learning moment on a grand scale.

I saw the movie last Monday, two days before its public release on Ash Wednesday. I came into in the middle because of a flight delay and therefore walked into a darkened, crowded theater and was struck literally, almost physically, with a bloody, contorted, disfigured image of a man being mercilessly beaten. On and on and on it went. Roman soldiers beating Jesus. Jesus' bloody body broken, falling down in slow motion, carrying an impossibly heavy cross, getting up and staggering on, more blows, more blood, more falling down. The screening was cosponsored by the American Jewish Committee, several churches, including this one, and the *Christian Century* magazine. The idea was that Jews and Christians should see this movie together, should sit beside each other and see and feel how the movie is seen and felt by the other. I'm glad I did—saw it that way. Jewish brothers and sisters I know and care about felt assaulted, bruised, beaten by the movie.

The reviews have been mixed.

Michael Wilmington of the *Tribune* didn't like it, called it a spectacle of horror, a cinematic horror chamber.

A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* said the film assaults the spirit rather than uplifting it, designed to terrify.

Roger Ebert appreciated it and helpfully recalled that as an altar boy, following the priest around the Stations of the Cross in Lent wasn't a deep spiritual experience: "Christ suffered. Christ died. Christ rose again. We were redeemed. Let's hope we can get home in time to watch the Illinois

basketball game on TV. What Gibson provided" Ebert said, "for the first time in my life, is a visceral idea of what the Passion consisted of."

Kathleen Falsani, *Sun Times*, like the person with whom I see movies, found herself covering her eyes for most of it.

You don't need another movie review this morning. But it is the first Sunday in Lent, the season when Christians traditionally have focused attention on the journey of Jesus Christ to the cross. It is a time for deep thinking and pondering and praying, a time when Christians have reflected on their own shortcomings—sins, if you will—and their own complicity in the very dynamics that brought about the tragedy of crucifixion. Gibson's timing is impeccable.

The intense public interest in the film is itself important. We talk a lot about the spiritual hunger of post-modernity, of the almost physical longing for meaning and purpose and promise. It's that and it's Mel Gibson and *Braveheart* and it's a public intrigued by *The DaVinci Code* and religious intrigue and maybe, just maybe, a public tired of religious conflict and ecclesiastical duplicity, a public looking for a little human integrity and authenticity.

It is violent. To echo what many have already said, maybe more violent than anything I have ever seen: a two-hour, virtually uninterrupted visualization of a man being beaten, tortured, and finally killed. Crucifixion was violent. The Romans were violent. They used crucifixion as a graphically public example of what happens to subversives. Mel Gibson's movie focuses on the last twelve hours of Jesus' life. So do the Gospels, not as exclusively as he did, but in his defense, the story of Jesus in the Bible does move relentlessly toward the cross. About a third of the Gospel accounts are devoted to the last week of his life.

Gibson's choice to portray the last twelve hours is certainly artistically legitimate, and it reflects his own religious commitment to a very conservative form of Roman Catholicism that rejects the reforming and modernizing actions of the Second Vatican Council. That older Catholicism is very much focused on the suffering of Christ, his blood, his wounds, his pierced hands and sides. The theology reflected focuses on the blood atonement: a victim's blood must be shed to pay for sin. In this case, God's own Son must die to atone for the sins of the world. That is the point Gibson is making, and for many Christians he makes it profoundly and deeply and meaningfully.

I think it is fair to say that in pursuit of that goal he chooses artistically to focus on the violence at the risk of exaggeration. When given a choice of how to interpret an incident, Gibson chooses the most violent way possible.

Of course it was terrible. Of course it was bloody. But the movie is relentless. The torturous Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross through the streets of Jerusalem, is a forty-five minute portrayal of excruciating agony, which for many—including me—was ultimately not inspiring but numbing. The New Testament is not nearly so graphic. The account is spare, lean—almost as if the writers themselves know that their readers know how terrible it was and out of respect do not describe the gruesome details, out of respect for his and their dignity spare them the bloody details. Perhaps it was like that. No one knows.

An example: in the Bible, Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane at night and the temple guards, who were Jewish, take him to the high priest. That's all the New Testament says. But in the movie, the guards brutally beat Jesus and throw him over a bridge. His chains excruciatingly wrench him to a halt just before he crashes to the ground. That's Mel Gibson, not the New Testament. New Testament scholar John Pawlinkowski says, "It is no less plausible that the guards were sympathetic, even reluctant, to carry out their duty, and escorted Jesus to the high priest gently and with dignity."

And, I confess, my Protestantism was jolted awake by a cameo appearance of Veronica, who gives Jesus a towel to wipe his bloody face, impressing the outline of his face on the towel—a Roman Catholic tradition that comes from thirteenth-century France and is not in the Bible.

My major concern is the matter of anti-Semitism. My Jewish friends felt assaulted and abused, and I understand why. They remind us that Christians and Jews see a different movie. It's difficult to hear the story or see it portrayed, literally without the benefit of critical thinking and historical and social and political understanding, and not come away blaming the Jews for Jesus' death.

The Gospels themselves were written not by eyewitnesses, mostly, but anywhere from thirty to seventy years after the fact. They were written at a time when tensions were high between the young Christian movement and the Jewish establishment, particularly in Jerusalem, where the temple and the priesthood were, and at a time when it was still not a good idea to antagonize Rome. When the Gospels describe what happened to Jesus it is in that context. That's called critical, historical thinking. Literalists—including Mel Gibson—don't do it.

What has resulted—tragically, horrifically, all the way down through the centuries—is Christian anti-Semitism. "Christ Killers" Jews were called in the Middle Ages. And every time anyone put on a Passion play—with crowds of Jews screaming "Crucify him" and a sneering Jewish high priest taunting him—persecution, pogroms, killing followed. Christian anti-Semitism

erupted during the first Crusade, in the eleventh century, when European armies marching under the banner of the cross—on the way to drive Muslims out of the Holy Land—turned on and massacred whole communities of Jews across Europe. In the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III said, “The blasphemers of Christ’s name should be forced into servitude of which they have made themselves deserving when they raised their sacrilegious hands against him who had come to confer true liberty upon them, thus calling down his blood upon themselves and their children.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, that’s what the crowd says: “His blood be upon us and our children,” and for centuries “blood guilt” was the official Christian position proclaimed and reiterated by the papacy and enthusiastically endorsed by Martin Luther. Vatican II, thankfully, changed that and so have the Protestant churches.

When the New Testament accounts say “The Jews”—as the accounts do—they do not mean the Jews, all the Jews, certainly not the descendants of the Jews. What the New Testament means is an elite group of priests and their supporters who were maintaining the temple in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day.

Please be patient for a very brief history. The place is Judea, a province of the Roman Empire, the home of Caesar’s Jewish subjects. The Roman prefect responsible for Judea is a man named Pontius Pilate. He lives in a palace in Caesarea, on the seacoast. He comes to Jerusalem, the capital, for Passover, because the city is full of pilgrims and the climate is volatile. Pilate, an efficient commander, has troops stationed strategically to keep the peace.

Rome governs by allowing subject nations some autonomy. So the Jewish King Herod is allowed to continue as king—so long as he knows who the real authority is and so long as he carries out Rome’s will and doesn’t make trouble. And because the religion of the Jewish people is so unusually important, Rome allows the Jews to keep their temple, the rituals, festivals, celebrate the Holy Days, as long as there is no civil disorder. The priests are allowed to stay. The chief priest, Caiaphas, by name, is also appointed by and accountable to Rome. He, too, knows who is really in charge and knows not to make trouble for the good and safety of the people.

In fact, there is a deal. It’s politics, not unlike in our fair city. Herod and Caiaphas keep their jobs so long as there is order and peace. That’s the situation into which Jesus of Nazareth rides on a donkey one day with a crowd of peasants shouting that he is the Messiah, the King of the Jews—certainly threatening to create civil disorder, upset the status quo, unravel the deal.

Gibson portrays Pilate as a sensitive, thoughtful politician, caught on the horns of a dilemma. Caiaphas and his priests come off far worse. Pilate wrings his hands; his wife sends clean towels to Mary. Caiaphas plots, schemes, sneers, taunts, follows Jesus all the way up the hill and watches as nails are driven in and the cross raised. When the skies darken, he and his party of priests scurry down the mountain in their regal, elaborate clerical garb.

It's no wonder our Jewish friends are nervous. Critics and scholars conclude that it is with Pilate and Caiaphas that Gibson has strayed farthest from history and, even though he clearly doesn't intend it, lends his film to those who continue, with increasing intensity in Europe and the Middle East and South America and Southeast Asia, the sin of anti-Semitism.

Here, for what it is worth, is what I think. I think I can understand both Pilate and Caiaphas. We know that Pilate was not a gentle, peace-loving politician. His career is punctuated with crucial mistakes and propensity to resort quickly to violence. Pilate crucified a lot of people—without trial. In fact, his career ends when he turns his troops loose on a crowd in Samaria and massacres many and is recalled in disgrace. But I understand Pilate and Caiaphas. They have made an arrangement, a deal, a compromise. It isn't the best, but they think it's the best they can do. Both believe they are acting in the best interests of their people: Pilate for Pax Romana, Caiaphas for the life and last shred of freedom for his people. Caiaphas is simply trying to keep the temple open, the precious symbol of the nation's history and identity. Both Pilate and Caiaphas wanted to keep the lid on, Roger Ebert said and, in one of the most helpful statements I read, pointed out that Caiaphas and the priests were working clergy and had practical reasons for their behavior: "like today's Catholic bishops who were slow to condemn abusive priests, Protestant TV preachers who confuse religion and politics, or Muslim clerics who are silent on terrorism, they have an investment in their position and authority."

And, I wish to add, like any one of us—and who is not in this number?—who has ever compromised principal and conviction for the purpose of preserving personal prerogative and the status quo.

So Caiaphas and Pilate independently decide that for the peace of the city and nation, and for the preservation of the temple, Jesus must die. They both did it, and in a way, I confess, I understand.

Jesus, alone, towers over it all, even as he walks toward the cross.

No, I didn't like all the violence. And yes, I think Gibson grossly, literally, overdoes it. But he does remind us that at the heart of our faith is the cross, on which a man died, voluntarily, willingly laying down his life—for what?

For his convictions, for God, for his people, for the sins of the world, for you and me.

We need the reminder. We Protestants took Jesus off the cross and helped our Roman Catholic friends see that the resurrection and empty cross is the central point, that lens through which we see everything, including our own lives and our own ultimate destiny. But we need the corrective. He died. There was a man on the cross.

Years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr commented on how easy we have made our religion "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a cross."

Liberal Protestantism, it has been said, took Jesus down from the cross and turned him into a gentle teacher and social reformer.

But the cross remains: the mystery finally not just of human pain and suffering but of divine love.

The history of Christian theology is the story of human beings trying to define exactly what it means, trying to reduce to words the exact thing that happened to us and for us when Jesus died.

Various theories have been offered: His death was a necessary sacrifice God's righteousness is offended by human sin and must, in some way, be satisfied. Like the ancient scapegoat, Jesus takes our sins upon him, suffers the fate we deserve, and the account is closed. Or the cross is the confrontation of the powers of good and evil, with evil seeming to win the day.

Or the cross is the expression of the ultimate self-giving love. In the death of Jesus, God identifies with our humanity, even our dying, literally walks through the valley of the shadow of death before us. The creeds don't try to explain: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried" the Apostles' Creed says. The Nicene Creed says only that his death "was for us and our salvation." We are still at it, discussing, arguing.

It is about love, finally. And the moment I finally saw that, finally left go of my own incessant need to analyze and criticize and comprehend, when I finally gave up trying to understand the cross and hesitantly took a stand under it, that was the day I decided to be a minister.

I recall it so well. It was near the end of a first year in divinity school, Holy Week to be exact, a year of rigorous study that included questioning everything I thought I believed. I came to Holy Week and the memories of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as a child and not understanding but

knowing that something monumentally important and good was occurring. And it didn't compute. Why is this suffering necessary, this brutal, almost barbarian event? Isn't it just one more example of the grimness of the human condition?

I had a long talk with Walter Phillips, a friend who lived down the hall, a congregational minister from Australia working on his Ph.D.

Walter listened quietly while I ranted and raved and concluded with my opinion that the cross was nothing more than a symbol of human cruelty.

Ah, he said, it is that indeed, cruel, violent, tragic. But John, he said, I've come to know that it's not so much about what people did to Jesus as what God has done for us. It's not so much about the reality of human cruelty and suffering, which, after all, is pretty predictable, as about the mystery of God's love.

And so it is. A love that comes to be with us and lives our life and somehow takes on itself our sin, a love that somehow lays down life itself and promises that in that love we are forever safe.

And so we stand under it even when we do not understand it.

Stand under it and quietly sing:

> Were the whole realm of nature mine
> That were a present far too small
> Love so amazing, so divine,
> Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Thanks be to God.